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From roller derby owner to Sonoma film festival founder

Jesse Hamlin

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Jerry Seltzer turns on his LOYS Modele Depose Vintage TV, a piece of art by Francois Kneider, in his office at his home in Sonoma, California, Friday, March 21, 2017. Mr. Seltzer ran the original Roller Derby which his father Leo Seltzer founded in 1935. Later, Jerry Seltzer co-founded BASS Tickets, a computerized ticketing service. He also co-founded the Sonoma Valley Film Festival, now know as Sonoma FilmFest. Ramin Rahimian/Special To The Chronicle

RAMIN RAHIMIAN, Special To The Chronicle

The 2012 installment of the Sonoma International Film Festival served up a pleasurable Sonoma blend of movies and scenes that included John Waters' hilarious one-man show, a screening of Luc Bresson's feature "The Lady" about Burmese patriot Aung Suu Kyi, and a tribute to Christopher Lloyd with the delightful bug-eyed actor on hand.

It was also the memorable year that swarms of young women on roller skates swooshed and sailed around the historic Sonoma Plaza and the Sebastiani Theatre before a screening of “Derby Baby: A Story of Love, Addiction and Rink Rash,” the Juliette Lewis-narrated documentary about women’s roller derby.

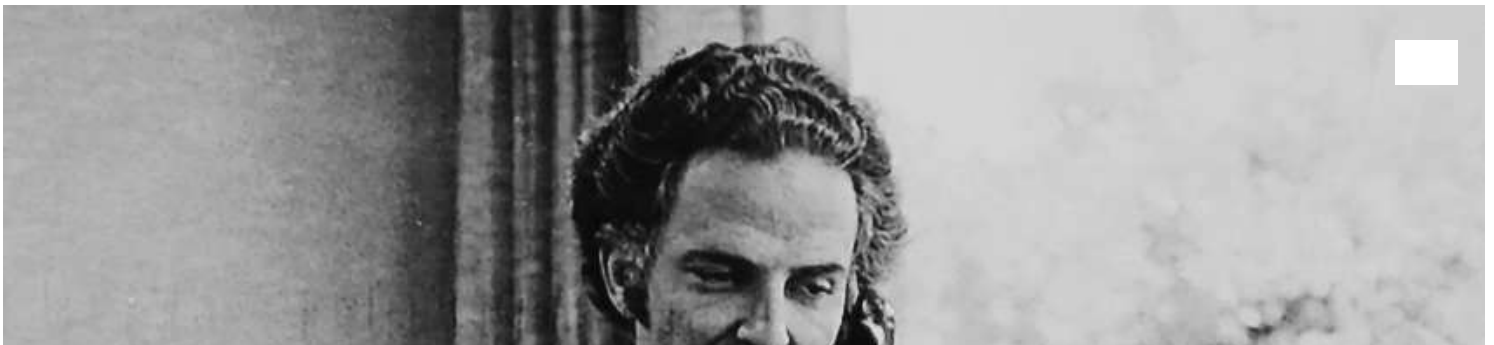
That crowd-pleasing performance was organized by affable promoter Jerry Seltzer, who among other ventures in a long career that includes starting the Bass computerized ticketing service and putting on concerts and benefits with artists like Willie Nelson and Robin Williams, ran and expanded Roller Derby — the game created by his father, Leo, during the Depression — at the height of its popularity in the 1960s and early ’70s.

Not only was Seltzer featured in the movie “Derby Baby,” he co-founded the relaxed Sonoma film festival 20 years ago and helped make it a choice destination for audiences and filmmakers who like the scale, the vibe, the food and wine. This year’s celebration, which runs Wednesday, March 29, through Sunday, April 2, offers 130 independent films from near and far, in seven venues within walking distance of each other, including a 91-seat mobile theater that unfolds on an 18-wheel rig.

“The event, that’s always been the thing for me. Seeing that people are happy, that they’re happy to come there,” says Seltzer, still a showman at 84, recalling with a smile the packed houses for Roller Derby matches at Madison Square Garden.

He’s sitting in the hilltop Sausalito home of his longtime significant other, a woman who prefers her name not be mentioned. He also lives part of the time in Sonoma. He returned to the Bay Area in 1997 after a decade as an executive vice president of Ticketmaster. He was approached that year by Carolyn Stolman about starting an Italian film festival tied to Sonoma’s sister-city relationship with the Tuscan town of Greve.

Unable to round up more than a few Italian films, they added other movies to put on the first festival as a fundraiser to restore the Sebastiani Theatre, designed by noted theater architect James Reid and built by August Sebastiani of the famed wine family in 1933.





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Archival photo provided by Jerry Seltzer himself at the Roller Derby headquarters at the Kaiser Mall in Oakland in 1969. Jerry Seltzer ran the original Roller Derby which his father Leo Seltzer founded in 1935. ... More
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Seltzer, a marketing expert who knows how to schmooze and organize, helped marshal and mobilize the battalion of volunteers who put on that first festival. Over the years, it has drawn stars like Susan Sarandon, Bruce Willis, Michael Keaton, and Pixar and Disney executive John Lasseter, who lives in the Sonoma County hamlet of Glen Ellen and got involved early on in the festival.

“The whole town gets into it,” says Seltzer, who plans to attend a handful of events this year, including the opening night festivities and film, “The Promise,” a love triangle set in the Ottoman Empire at the start of the Armenian genocide, starring Christian Bale as an American journalist. One of the co-stars, Armenian American actress Angela Sarafyan, will be there.

“Now we get hundreds of submissions, but in the early days, we had to beg people to come,” says Seltzer, sitting on a sofa beneath a framed poster from the first Sonoma Film Festival. It shares wall space with a poster for the first San Francisco Hooker’s Ball he produced with Margo St. James, and a framed photograph of the Highwaymen (Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson) from the 1991 Bass Foundation benefit Seltzer put on at the Paramount Theater to help victims of the Oakland hills fire.

He’s taking oxygen for a pulmonary illness, but looks fit in a pair of black jeans and a shirt emblazoned with the logo of Brown Paper Tickets, the Seattle “fair-trade ticketing company,” as it calls itself, that hired the octogenarian a few years ago to help with marketing. Used by many nonprofits, the company

joined the octogenarian a few years ago to help with marketing. Used by many nonprofits, the company charges as little as 99 cents per ticket.

“I always say I’m doing it to counteract the evil I helped create at Ticketmaster,” Seltzer says with a laugh.

He and partner Hal Silen got into the ticket business in ’74, the year after financial considerations forced Seltzer to close the family Roller Derby business that he had taken over from his father in 1959.

Seltzer then began syndicating videotapes of the Roller Derby games he produced at San Francisco’s Kezar Pavilion to stations across the country, whetting fans’ appetite for live shows featuring the men and women skaters of the San Francisco Bay Bombers and other teams the company owned.



Archival photo provided by Jerry Seltzer of Mr. Seltzer with skaters during Roller Jam in 2000. Mr. Seltzer ran the original Roller Derby which his father Leo Seltzer founded in 1935. Later, Jerry Seltzer co-founded BASS Tickets, a computerized ticketing service. He also co-founded the Sonoma Valley Film Festival, now know as Sonoma FilmFest. Ramin Rahimian/Special to The Chronicle
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During the ’60s, the Giants were the only Bay Area sports team that outdrew the Bombers, prompting a radio announcer to propose to Seltzer that if Roller Derby wanted more respect, it should be more like baseball.

“That’s definitely true,” replied Seltzer, quoted in Keith Copping’s book “Roller Derby to Roller Jam: the Authorized Story of an Unauthorized Sport,” “but as hard as I try, I can’t convince our skaters to chew tobacco and scratch themselves.”

These days, Seltzer serves as the honorary commissioner of an amateur roller derby league and does blood drives for the Red Cross, among other philanthropic work. And there’s the Sonoma International Film Festival, where he remains a vital presence.

“Jerry is a networker. He’s gregarious, upbeat, young in spirit and thought,” says festival executive director Kevin McNeely, who began volunteering at the first festival and has seen Seltzer in action for two decades.

McNeely, a former independent TV producer who lives in Sonoma, works with a committee to choose the films for the festival from 700 to 800 submissions. He then picks the final slate with Los Angeles film programmer Steve Shor. Of the 130 films from 27 countries on view this year, 63 are full-length features, and there are five programs of shorts with six films apiece.

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Seltzer, whose father owned movie theaters in Portland, Ore., before moving the family to Chicago in the 1930s, has catholic tastes in films, but is partial to, as he puts it, “anything that’s kind of off-center and shows different kinds of people and what they’re about.”

There’s plenty of that at the Sonoma festival, which “is in a beautiful setting, and not really connected to the movie industry,” says Seltzer, who’s sort of amazed that “our little Italian film festival that never happened” became something bigger that’s still around.

Jesse Hamlin is a Bay Area freelance writer

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Sonoma International Film Festival: Wednesday-Sunday, March 29-April 2. Various venues. (707) 933-2600, www.sonomafilmfest.org

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